

ISLCA Corner (Indian Society of Life Cycle Assessment)

State of Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) in India

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It is well known that every consumer product has an impact on the environment. However, an average consumer does not know which product has less or more impact than the other one. Any product, which is made, used or disposed of in a way that significantly reduces the harm it would otherwise cause to the environment, could be considered an eco-friendly product. Slowly, consumers in India are taking lead in prompting manufacturers to adopt clean technologies to produce eco-friendly products.

Ecomark Scheme of India

To enhance awareness about the environmental impacts of products, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India (GoI) has initiated a scheme in 1991, which is basically a scheme of labelling the eco-friendly products. It is known as 'Ecomark' scheme and aims at easy identification of eco-friendly products. The scheme is based on a 'cradle-to-grave' approach and takes into account the impact of a product from raw material extraction, to manufacturing, and to final disposal. An earthen pot has been chosen as the logo for the Ecomark scheme. The familiar earthen pot uses a renewable resource like earth, does not produce hazardous waste and consumes little energy in making. Its solid and graceful form represents both strength and fragility, which also characterises the eco-system. The 'Ecomark' label is awarded to consumer goods, which meet the specified environmental criteria and the quality requirements of Indian Standards. Any product bearing the Ecomark is regarded environmentally as the right choice (MoEF, 2003).

Broadly, the objectives of the ecomark scheme are – to provide an incentive for manufacturers, importers and companies to reduce adverse environmental impact of products and to assist consumers to become environmentally responsible in their daily life by providing information to take account of environmental factors in their purchase decisions. This ultimately would improve the quality of the environment and encourage sustainable management of resources in the country.

The Ecomark is awarded after rigorous evaluation by three committees, namely Steering Committee (MoEF), Technical Committee (Central Pollution Control Board, i.e. CPCB) and the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), which are involved in the criteria development for each product category. The CPCB is a member of Global Eco-labeling Network (GEN) since March 2000. The BIS is responsible for assessing and certifying the products and drawing up a contract with the manufacturers, allowing the use of the label, on payment of a fee.

There are two main criteria used to decide the product's eco-friendliness – Product General Requirements and Product Specific Requirements. The product's general requirements deal with the issues of compliance of the pollution control acts; raising environmental awareness among consumers, etc., in addition to safety, quality and performance of the products.

While determining the product-specific requirements, the following issues are taken into account – production process including source of raw materials; use of natural resources; likely impact on the environment; energy conservation in the production of the product; effect and extent of waste arising from the production process; disposal of the product and its container; utilisation of 'Waste' and recycled materials; suitability for recycling or packaging; and biodegradability.

Sixteen categories of products such as soaps and detergents, paper, food items, etc. are covered under the scheme so far. To give an ex-

ample, the criteria for paper and paper products are as follows: Under general requirements, each paper manufacturer must meet the requirements of BIS pertaining to quality and performance. They should also meet requirements of various environmental legislations such as Water Act, Air Act, Environment Act, etc. Under product-specific requirements, the paper and paper boards manufactured out of pulp containing not less than 60 percent by weight of pulp made from materials other than bamboo, hard woods, soft woods and reed or recycled paper and paper board must be made from 100 percent waste paper. Similarly, paper and paper boards used for packaging of food materials should be manufactured from virgin pulp and be free from dioxins. Printed surfaces of the paper shall not come into contact with the food and the maximum amounts of contaminants in paper intended to come into contact with food must not exceed the prescribed limits. Based upon these criteria, various papers are given certain marks by BIS like IS:1848 for writing and printing paper and IS:14661 for toilet paper.

The license to use Ecomark is granted by the BIS after evaluation of the manufacturer and the product on various aspects. Under the scheme of Ecomark, the Standard Mark of the Bureau shall be a single mark being a combination of the IS-Mark and the Eco-logo. Certain fees like application fee, annual license fee and renewal fee, etc. are payable by the licensee. The feedback received from consumer forums/organisations are also taken into account for assessing the performance and renewal of the licensee.

Consumer's Attitude

To investigate consumer's attitudes towards eco-products, a case study on 'eco-friendly packaging (EFP) and consumer buying behaviour' was conducted in Mumbai, India (Sharma and Babel 2002). The objective of the study was to assess the impact of EFP on consumer buying behaviour in India. The data were collected from the respondents selected randomly within the city of Mumbai. The views of the respondents belonging to different age groups, gender, income and education levels were analyzed.

The findings of the study revealed that the product packaging was an important parameter for a majority of consumers while selecting a product. They knew that packaging was increasingly becoming a nuisance as it added to the solid waste. However, it was found that an awareness level of consumers about EFP was not high. A significant correlation was observed among awareness of EFP, education and income levels. Consumers, in general, feel the need to have EFP, but most of them were not willing to pay extra cost for the 'greener products' carrying it.

EPDs as Non-Tariff Trade Barriers

The possibility of environmental product declarations (EPDs) acting as non-tariff trade barriers for developing countries can not be ruled out. To meet the requirements for the emerging product, process and packaging standards may cost much more, resulting in a high cost of final products meant for exports from these countries. This would reduce their market competitiveness and they would lose the comparative advantage of cheap labour, raw material and other resources available to them. Some detailed studies on trade and environment linkages covering Indian paper industry, leather industry and fishery industry have been carried out in India, which established such possibilities.